

# Seub Jata, A Thai Ritual in the Home



*Seub Jata ceremony in Northern Thailand.* Photo by Vithi Phanichphant

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In Thailand many ceremonies that mark life's passages, like birth, marriage, and death, are held in the home. For Northern Thais, especially the Lanna people, the Seub Jata is a ceremony celebrated at home to generate good fortune and ensure well-being. Seub Jata means extending life, lengthening a happy existence, and the ritual can be performed after a person endures hardship, sickness, or other adversity; or during Thai New Year rites, in April; or at a house-warming ceremony; or at a birthday celebration; or when one achieves an appointment to an important position; or when one receives a poor horoscope reading and wishes to avert misfortune. All are occasions for supporting life.

Seub Jata probably has roots in the early Southeast Asian animistic practice that preceded the arrival of Buddhism. Many parts of the cere-

mony contain elements of shamanism, and its Buddhist chants and rites seem to be more icing than real content. Through ritual arts participants honor the gods and spirits; cleanse the self by burning and discarding symbolic objects; overcome obstacles and journey into new life; establish firm supports to life; make merit by releasing captive lives and halting agony; and affirm Buddhist precepts and pathways toward happiness.

To prepare for a Seub Jata ritual, a host sets an auspicious date in consultation with an astrologer, checks the availability of a shaman, asks for the assistance usually of nine Buddhist monks, and invites relatives and friends, who often contribute ceremonial items or help with preparations.

Ritual objects and acts reflect both Buddhist and animist concepts. A Buddhist altar with candles, flowers, and joss sticks is augmented by perfumed water, a splasher, and a beeswax candle.

Near the chief monk's seat are a ball of white cotton string and palm-leaf scripture, fresh flowers and joss sticks, and an offering tray for the spirits on which are placed betel nuts, flowers, candles, joss sticks, rice grains, cowry shells, a red-and-white-textile, perfumed water, and silver money.

The animist component is more elaborate, and central to it is a tripod of freshly cut tree saplings about 2 inches thick and 7 feet long, under which the host sits during the ceremony. Twigs about 2 feet long, whose number matches the age in years of the person ritually involved, assist these three major life supports. Two 6-foot long bamboo poles, one containing sand, the other water, recall the combination of earth and water elements in a person. A miniature ladder usually made of banana stalks holds payments for a smooth life journey upward; these include gold and silver threads, red and white flowers, betel nuts, puffed rice, cigars, and tea leaves. A wooden bridge envisions passing over difficulty. A candle or oiled cotton strip as long as a person is burned to cleanse one's life and physical body. A large banner in human shape represents a purified soul. Live sprouts of coconut, betel, sugar cane, and banana symbolize a new beginning. Gold- and silver-colored pots envision prosperity. A new drinking-water jar, with bowls of unhusked rice, milled rice, and sand, portray endless wealth with their countless grains. Large bunches of fresh bananas and fresh coconuts provision a long life's journey, and a woven bamboo eagle's eye and a twisted grass robe offer protection. A new mat and pillow represent a new place to sleep, and new household utensils, such as a stove, especial-

ly at a house-warming ceremony, represent a new, prosperous stage of life. A straw tree of 108 small flags pays homage to all lordships and deities. A square tray of food, flowers, and joss sticks is an offering to all devas and spirits, particularly the gods of the four cardinal directions. A *baisri*, a neatly arranged tray of foods set in elaborately folded banana leaves, attracts a person's 32 spirits to come and stay. Caged birds, live fish, turtles, and shellfish will be set free as an act of making merit.

At nine or ten o'clock in the morning the host lights the joss sticks and candles at the altar to begin the event. The chief monk raises the tray of offerings to the spirits and chants words of praise. The shaman leads a chant paying homage to the Lord Buddha and requesting the Buddhist five precepts. A series of chants invites various forms of good fortune and well-being. The long cotton string is fastened to the altar, the monks' hands, the top of the tripod, and the heads and palms of all who are to benefit from the ritual, including the host. After the chanting and a monk's reading of the Buddhist manuscript, the monks perform a *baisri* ceremony in which they tie cotton strings to the wrists of host, friends, and relatives to stabilize their spirits and souls. Lunch is then offered to the monks. While they eat, the host gently releases the caged animals. A feast and entertainment follow.

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